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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 001359

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PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: [PINR](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: SECOND VICE-PRESIDENT SWORN IN, TOUTED AS
TOP-RANKING FEMALE ARAB GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons
1.4(b)/(d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: According to press reports, President Bashar al-Asad swore in Dr. Najah al-Attar as vice-president on March 23. Attar, a nominal political independent with a long career in senior positions in the regime of Hafiz al-Asad, will be responsible for cultural affairs. Press reports tout Attar as the top-ranking female official in the Arab world. She came out of semi-retirement to assume the position. Her appointment has drawn attention for its timing, coming in the wake of the recent formation of the National Salvation Front (NSF) by former VP Abdelhalim Khaddam and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which her brother Issam headed in the 1950s and 60s. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) Vice-President Dr. Najah al-Attar is a Sunni Muslim born to a prominent Damascene family in 1933. In 1976, Attar became Syria's first female minister upon her appointment as Minister of Culture and National Guidance. During the 1980s, she also served as government spokesperson. She remained Minister of Culture until 2000, during which time a number of cultural institutions like the National Symphonic Orchestra were founded and the construction of the Syrian Opera House began. She has not held a high-level position since 2000.

13. (C) A SARG RIPOSTE TO KHADDAM-BAYANOUNI? Attar's appointment has drawn attention for its timing, coming in the wake of the recent formation of the National Salvation Front (NSF) by former VP Abdelhalim Khaddam and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which her brother Issam headed in the 1950s and 60s. (He has been in exile in Germany since 1963). While he has reportedly retired from active politics, human rights lawyer and Islamist sympathizer Haithem al-Maleh, who maintains active contact with Attar, reported that he does in fact participate in at least some political discussions. Maleh recently cited a telephone discussion with Attar regarding the NSF, during which Maleh claimed Attar had expressed concerns about the MB's new partnership with Khaddam. Some observers have viewed the Attar appointment as Asad's attempt to respond to the formation of the Khaddam-Bayanouni NSF in Brussels.

14. (C) Others have dismissed any connection between the appointment and the NSF formation, noting that Attar has had a long career of public service to the Ba'th-led regime, throughout her brother's dissident career. Al-Hayat journalist Ibrahim Hamidi told Poloff that the appointment was a harsh gesture towards the MB, signaling them that the SARG does not need them and that it is able to co-opt even their own family members. On a separate issue, Hamidi and others also noted that Attar enjoys a good reputation among some opposition figures whom she employed in the Ministry of

Culture when they encountered difficulty securing employment elsewhere.

¶5. (C) A SIGN OF ASAD'S INSISTENCE ON COMPETENCE? Attar's appointment is also being publicly touted as a sign of the improving status of Syrian women, with Syrian press reports touting Attar as the top-ranking female official in the Arab world. Observers also noted that the appointment is emblematic of President Bashar al-Asad's meritocratic appointments of non-Ba'th Party members. Al-Safir correspondent Ziad Haider told Charge that Asad was determined to get more competent leadership for the Ministry of Culture after what he described as a series of lackluster successors to Attar, culminating in the poorly organized campaign celebrating "Aleppo, Islamic Culture Capital for 2005." According to Haider, Asad is convinced that Syria has a tremendously rich cultural heritage (with tourist potential) which does not receive the prominence it deserves. He also noted that Asad had not originally planned to appoint any other vice presidents when he appointed former FM Shara'a as VP in charge of foreign policy and media affairs.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: It is difficult to believe that the appointment of a septuagenarian bureaucrat to take on the relatively unimportant cultural affairs portfolio can bear as much symbolic weight as the press and some of our Syrian contacts have sought to give it. Nonetheless, the timing is interesting and indicates that the SARG leadership may have been trying, however feebly, to use the appointment to send out a cluster of unclear messages on the Muslim Brothers, the role of women, and the need for competence in government. None of these messages conveyed by the Attar appointment is likely to have much of a shelf life, but the effort is emblematic of the "too little, too late, too timid" efforts

this regime repeatedly makes to redress problems it must confront but cannot really deal with in any serious way.

¶7. (U) ADDITIONAL BIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION: Attar comes from prominent Damascene family. Her father was a nationalist leader who took part in the 1925-1927 revolt against the French Mandate. Her physician husband, Dr. Majed al-Azmeh, belongs to an equally prominent Damascene family. Attar graduated from Damascus University in 1954, and later completed graduate and postgraduate degrees in Arabic literature from the University of Edinburgh in the UK. She began her career as a schoolteacher in Damascus. She then moved to the Ministry of Culture in 1962, eventually being named Minister in 1976. Following her 2000 dismissal from the cabinet, Attar became the director of the Center for the Dialogue of Civilizations and served on the board of at least two private Syrian universities.

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